

What can parents do to keep teens safe from drug use?

By Brandi McFerran

Parenting through the teenage years is a tricky time. Teens are developing their own personal identities and often push the limits of parental control. They are gaining independence and skill in navigating life challenges and choices, yet they still need their parents/guardians for safety and support.

It is important to set clear boundaries around drugs and alcohol. This is a critical time to have conversations with your child about substance use – even if you do not suspect they are trying drugs or alcohol.

If you suspect that your teen is using drugs or alcohol, there are ways to help your teen. First and foremost, educate yourself on current trends and safety.

According to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, nicotine use is again on the rise with e-cigarettes and “vapes.” Nicotine use exacerbates mental health problems. To learn about products to watch out for, parents may visit “Tall Cop Says Stop” on Facebook. This account shares images and information on clothing brands, vape pens, “dab” pens and other products.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse website has current data on drug trends. Drug use is not becoming more common in youth but is becoming more dangerous; teen overdose deaths from illicit drugs continue to increase.

Open communication

It’s important to know your child, their peers and friends. Keep communication lines open with your child.

Have a calm conversation with your child about drugs. Use open-ended questions and be non-judgmental, supportive, and caring. Express that you are concerned and care about their best interests. Don’t use harsh language, condemning or name-calling. Threats can escalate the situation and cause your teen to stop sharing with you.

Encourage your teen to take safety measures while also encouraging them to consider reasons for discontinuing use. Teens often struggle to think through how choices might affect their future and need help with this. Safer use might mean never driving after drinking or using substances (including cannabis) and never using substances from an unknown source (such as from a stranger, the street or something purchased illegally).

Plan for safety

Talk to your teen to come up with a safety plan so that they don’t drink or use substances and drive or get in the car with someone who is under the influence. Let them know they can call you in an emergency or tricky situation.

Offer your teen options, such as counseling and education. Your school counselor, mental health counselor or medical provider can guide you towards needed resources, including addiction treatment and assessing your child to determine if a higher level of care or intervention is needed.

Here are a few more good information sources for parents and guardians:

- childmind.org, where you can read about “How to Talk to Your Teen About Substance Use,” and “What Parents Should Know About Teens, Drinking and Drugs.”
- The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a confidential hotline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for individuals and families facing mental health and substance use issues.
- Go to samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline for the helpline and other resources, including articles on substance abuse treatment, how to care for a family member after treatment in an emergency department and the role of family therapy.

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